Land cruising with Luise

Pam Macdonald

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My husband, Colin Macdonald, and I were introduced to Luise Hercus in 1990 by our mutual friend Isabel McBryde, a gifted talent scout, who realised how much our interests might overlap: Luise was doing fascinating fieldwork in South Australia, and Colin and myself were a retired couple with a diesel four-wheel drive and a love of exploring the countryside. As a result, we accompanied Luise on twelve of her field trips between May 1991 and September 2000.

No two trips with Luise were the same, but all were enthralling. Some were very, very hot, while one, to Simpson Desert wells in May 1993, was initially very, very wet. One lunch time, table and chairs were set up on the crown of the Birdsville track as the verges were too muddy, and everything was so soggy that there was no traffic. Another trip to lignum-fringed waterholes on Eyre Creek in November 1991 involved fourteen punctures in thirty-six hours, and big boots were required to break the tyres free from the rims for inner-tube repairs while dinner cooked. The snatchem strap (a towline used to pull vehicles that are stuck) came into its own. We would sometimes see the lead vehicle sink into a collapsing sand dune undermined by rabbits.

Our early trips with Luise and Vlad Potezny were undertaken before GPS navigation systems were readily available. We followed their vehicle across country confidently as Vlad had such extraordinary skills and could read the landscape so well, but what if we lost them? So map-reading became part and parcel of our day. We enjoyed stopping at sites, hearing how they fitted into mythological stories, seeing where people had lived, and all in good company. A recurring theme was seeing Vlad striding along, eyes scanning the ground, two cameras hanging from his wrist; meantime Luise was adding more to her knowledge of the area.

The evening ritual on these trips entailed strategic positioning of the vehicles and starting the camp fire. After cool drinks and canapes had been enjoyed Luise would prepare vegetables for soup. Once the soup was in a pot over the fire Luise would be back to work interviewing her consultants with one or two tape recorders on her lap – one for work in progress and the other for earlier recordings, I think,
Figure 1: An immense Acacia peuce tree in the western Simpson Desert that represents the Native Cat Ancestor Malbunga calling his followers on their way back from Port Augusta. From left to right: Rex Stuart, Laurie Stuart, Bingee Lowe, Luise, Vlad Potezny. Photo: Colin Macdonald, 17 May 1997.
with many tapes to hand, juggling microphones, and always seeming to know just where she was on each tape. One evening she played a recently digitised copy of a wax cylinder recording made by Baldwin Spencer a century earlier not far from where we were camped. That was a special moment.

As a child in the 1930s Colin had marvelled at the length and strangeness of the name ‘Lake Cadibarrawirracanna’ that was shown on a map of Australia on the cover of his school exercise books. It was an unexpected pleasure for us to visit this place with Luise in June 1995, and to learn from her its association with the Seven Sisters story and the significance of its poetic name *Kardipirla warrakanha*, ‘the stars were dancing together’.


Throughout our travels Luise retained her patience (sorely tried on many occasions), good humour and enthusiasm. We feel honoured to have been included amongst her many friends in the field. It was a truly memorable decade.